



30 Minutes
... Before Your
Job Appraisal

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30 Minutes ... Before Your Job Appraisal

Patrick Forsyth



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INTRODUCTION

‘No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.’

Eleanor Roosevelt

It is likely that your work is demanding. You no doubt feel you do your best. Maybe your job is satisfying, not least because doing it gives you a sense of achievement. You feel you make things happen, that you make a difference. So, why do you hate the thought of a job appraisal meeting? Once a year, sometimes more, someone sits you down in an office and – this is how it may seem – tells you all the things you are doing wrong, inadequately or failing to do at all. If that is the case no wonder you do not look forward to it.

Yet job appraisals go with the territory, so to speak. Work in an organization of any size and you will have one, if for no other reason than because employment legislation prompts most organizations to undertake an appraisal process. But it should be, and often is, more than that. And it can be much more. Appraisals represent a unique opportunity to check progress, assess results and look to the future – acting to make it more likely that future



performance will not only be satisfactory, but that it will achieve something more. Or they should do.

Sometimes job appraisals are not very constructive, or motivational. If they are not understood, if managers dislike conducting them, or find the process difficult, then they are unlikely to achieve very much. If this is the case then they represent a lost opportunity, because appraisal should be useful to the organization, the appraiser and the appraisee. In this book we do not look at how to appraise people, though managers who have to do this task may well find the content useful, but rather review the experience from the point of view of those being appraised – the appraisees. You should find your appraisal constructive, helpful and something that helps both your job and your career.

Of course, you are dependent to some extent on the systems used, and how management implements them. But you can influence the process yourself, maybe to a significant extent. How an appraisal is made constructive matters less than that it is. The aim of this short book is simple: to help you get more out of your next appraisal. This means not just helping to make the experience easier or more comfortable, but to see that more positive action results from the appraisal to help make next year's work more satisfying, the desired results more likely to be achieved and, in the long term, that your career progresses satisfactorily.

No one should go blindly into their appraisal meeting hoping for the best and aiming only to 'play it by ear'. It is too important for that. Potentially you have a great deal to gain and it is certainly worth some thought (certainly 30 minutes worth!) before it begins.

1

THE REASONS FOR JOB APPRAISALS

The fact that usually you have no choice about whether you attend an appraisal meeting makes considering the reasons the company and the appraiser have for insisting on it a sensible starting point. After all, you do not make all the rules. There is probably a system, forms and procedures which exist and which will be part of what occurs. This does not mean that it is impossible to influence matters, but if you are to do so you need to understand the reasons why things happen the way they do.

Job appraisals may come in many guises. In many organizations this term is sufficient to identify the kind of meeting and process involved. In others there may be other names. These usually involve words like planning, assessment, individual and performance – personal performance assessment, perhaps. Whatever it is called the reasons for its existence are likely to be similar.



Reasons, which should benefit both the individual and the organization, include:

- reviewing individuals' past performance;
- planning their future work and role;
- setting specific individual future goals;
- agreeing and creating individual ownership of such goals;
- identifying development needs and setting up development activity;
- on-the-spot coaching;
- obtaining feedback;
- reinforcing or extending the reporting relationship;
- acting as a catalyst to delegation;
- focusing on longer-term career progression;
- acting motivationally.

The review may focus on some or all of these; they are not mutually exclusive, but the relative emphasis may well vary. Overall the intention, through all of the above, is to improve existing performance (taking the view that even good performance can often be improved), and make the likelihood of achieving future plans that much greater.

Clarifying your position

It may be that the first time you hear mention of an organization's appraisal is at a recruitment interview before you take up a job. Certainly then, or soon after taking up employment, is a good time to ask some questions. Ideally



the appraisal will be seen as beneficial for both parties so questions should be well received. It is certainly a reasonable area for a prospective employee to investigate.

Consider asking:

- Will I have a job description?
- How often will I receive an appraisal?
- What form will my appraisal take?
- What topics will be reviewed at appraisal?
- What specific targets form part of the review?
- Is there a standard rating procedure? (Maybe you can see, or ask to see, any documentation.)
- How does this system relate to salary review?
- What is the link between appraisal and development and training?

The answers you receive can be illuminating. You may find that your prospective employer considers the appraisal process as being unimportant and it might even change your view of him or her as an employer. It may seem an easy option to escape a real form of assessment, but do you really want to work in a company where your performance is of so little consequence? On the other hand, if it transpires that a major part of a future review will centre on the achievement or not of a single specific target, then this too is worth knowing.

You will be able to approach your first appraisal meeting much more easily if you have firm knowledge of its purpose and how it is regarded in the company.



Salary and rewards considerations

It is not strictly the role of appraisals to act in any way to fix salary, or other reward levels, for the future. Having said that, many companies do link appraisals and salary review closely, and – at worst – appraisal is no more than a quick chat followed by the disclosure of what next year's salary is going to be (and sometimes a spirited defence by management as to why it cannot be more). On occasion, and at some levels, much of the meeting can follow a salary announcement and be concerned only with negotiating the levels of salary and rewards.

More sensibly, many companies separate the two processes. Appraisal is an objective assessment of work to date and what makes it valuable are the reasons stated earlier. Salary and an assessment of how it should change is another matter, best dealt with at another time. Certainly if it is known that appraisal meetings end with the announcement of a revised salary, then it may distract both the appraiser and the appraisee from concentrating on the issues at hand in the early part of the discussion, and prevent honest and open discussion of any difficulties.

If you want to judge the way your own organization works with regard to appraisals this is one of the factors to check; you may find the actual approach used most constructive when the two factors are separated.

Employment legislation

This book is too brief to review all of the ins and outs of employment law. Suffice it to say that it is complex, constantly changing and that organizations are very aware that



transgressing it can be a time-consuming and costly business. The newspapers regularly bear testimony to the extremes involved, as they bring reports of cases addressing such matters as wrongful dismissal or discrimination in the courts and the industrial tribunals that are also involved.

The link here with appraisal is primarily to performance. Ultimately, people's failure to perform can result in dismissal. But what is satisfactory performance and how do employees know whether they are achieving it or not? The answer needs to involve the formality of job descriptions and appraisal. Simplistically, the law makes it difficult to dismiss employees for poor performance if they are able to demonstrate that they have been given no clear definition of their job, or regular ability to know how they are performing – not unreasonable, perhaps. But this link conditions some of the elements of both systems and job descriptions, and appraisals can be deployed only as an insurance against future trouble of this sort.

There is no need to overreact to this picture. Most companies do have constructive reasons apart from this for running an appraisal system; they want to get the most from it and they want it to assist in producing good performance and results in the future. It does no harm, however, to bear this background in mind as part of the picture.

Special factors

A last element to bear in mind as you contemplate the rationale for whatever system your organization uses is how it may relate to particular circumstances. For example, cultural factors vary. Some US-owned organizations have



much more formal systems than is usual in the United Kingdom. In other countries the prevailing styles may differ. Such systems in France are very much more concerned with behavioural factors than those in some other countries.

Similarly, systems may reflect topical factors. For example, a company may have been taken over and be changing to the system of the new parent – measurement may be increased as a prelude to some particular event (this might be positive or negative: the laying off of staff or the expansion of the business).

Again, if you are aware of such factors then you enhance your ability to interact with the system in the right kind of way.

Overall, the need is to understand what is being done, why it is being done the way it is and what attitudes to it exist among appraisers and appraisees. If a little research is necessary to achieve this, then it likely amounts to no more than a few questions and the time taken is minimal.

2

THE PERSONAL OPPORTUNITY

First, you need to be clear in your own mind about how appraisal is regarded by the organization and by the individual manager who will conduct your appraisal meeting (and note this may mean managers). Then you need to think about how it can help you. Clearly you need it to be constructive. A 'messy' meeting helps no one, and clarity of purpose is one contributory factor in making it go well.

Specifically, you need to set yourself objectives under a number of headings:

- planning how to make positive points about performance during the period under review;
- being ready to respond appropriately to points raised, including negative ones;
- projecting the right image;
- reviewing specific work plans for the next period;



- reviewing factors on which success in the future depends;
- identifying the need or desirability for training and development;
- looking ahead to longer-term career development;
- linking discussion to salary and benefits review.

Your thinking about all of these needs to be positive. Appraisals are rightly described as an opportunity. What needs to be done is not simply to think broadly about the sort of year it has been overall, but to have clear intentions regarding what needs to be (or will inevitably) be discussed and what you can get from the discussion.

The first two points above – essentially planning how you will handle the points discussed, both about the past and about the future, will be left on one side for the moment (both Chapters 3 and 4 include comment about this). The other points are reviewed here, in turn.

Projecting the right image

The attitude you take to this spans the whole process. It may help to think about it in two ways:

- 1 The image you project in terms of your *attitude to the appraisal*. Here you need to make sure that it is clear that you accept and understand the need for appraisal, that you are approaching it constructively and that you intend to help ensure it helps you produce a good performance in the next period. You are unlikely to impress an appraiser if you seem resentful of the process, take a negative view or are inappropriately



defensive. It is easy to overreact to criticism – and realistically there may well be some. You need to state your side of things, but you may also need to accept and agree that some things were not perfect and move on to other matters.

- 2 *Attitude to the job.* Remember that how you are perceived has a direct bearing on your job prospects, everything from the likelihood of your taking on a little more responsibility to you being promoted. Remember too that people extrapolate their perceptions. Arrive ill-prepared for your appraisal and you may find that you are not just seen as momentarily disorganized with regard to an important occasion, but that assumptions are made that you are generally poorly organized in the way you do your job. Such a view might directly influence decisions about your future.

So, consider how you want to be seen (this is useful beyond appraisal). You may want to be seen as knowledgeable, expert, capable, innovative or creative, good with people or at communicating, efficient and productive, well organized, reliable, giving appropriate attention to detail, confident, or any or all of these and more. You may want such factors to come over in a very specific way: displaying impressive knowledge of computer systems, perhaps, or being able not just to communicate but produce the best written report in the office.

If you think about it, not only are there a fair number of points in such a list, but they are also all things you can elect to project. For example, you may not be naturally well organized, you work hard at it and manage to achieve what you want, but on occasions such as appraisals you make



sure there is no chance you will be mistaken for someone disorganized. The moral here is to make sure you think through, in sufficient detail, how you want to come over and make doing so an active process.

Reviewing specific work plans

Here you need to focus on the job you do and what doing it will mean in the future. Maybe you are about to embark on managing a particular project. This might entail liaison with others, tight deadlines or push you into areas beyond your current experience. If so, consider what help, advice or support you might find useful from your manager and use the appraisal to touch on the process. It is unlikely to be the occasion to discuss such matters in detail, you could seek to set up another meeting for that, but having the fact of it on the table, as it were, may influence other elements of your discussion.

Reviewing success criteria

This links closely with the previous heading and you need to think about what your job will entail over the coming months, and what factors are involved that affect your potential success. Maybe economic conditions are changing and you feel targets should too, or staffing changes are planned which will tie up time on hand-over activity. Or systems changes will mean time needs to be spent on training or running things in.

The examples above are negative, that is, they might hinder your ability to do the job. Positive factors may need



discussion also. For example, systems changes might free up time and provide the opportunity to take additional initiatives elsewhere.

In either case, it may be useful at a later date to be able to link a request for support to an overall intention agreed at appraisal.

Training and development

This should be a mandatory topic for any appraisal. In most organizations it pays to be seen as keen on training. Indeed, given the dynamic world in which we all live, it is sensible to assume that whatever skills you have will not see you through an entire career, but that they will need updating and extending on a regular basis.

Training can be viewed in two ways: 1) *Immediate needs*: those things that link very specifically to the current job and the work over the coming months. If you know you are going to have to undertake many more formal presentations in future*, for instance, and do not feel sufficiently confident in your ability to do them well, then appraisal is a good time to aim to get agreement to attend a course; 2) *Longer-term needs*: here you may see a longer-term need and consider it worth making a start on whatever it is sooner rather than later; and certainly instead of having to do something in a rush later. Or you may simply want to extend your competencies, abilities and perspective with

* If this is really the case for you, consider *30 Minutes Before a Presentation*, from this same series.



a general eye on the future. Organizations will often accommodate both, though perhaps it is easier to gain agreement to the former, so again you can form specific intentions as to what you want to achieve.

Remember, training and development encompass a wide range of different activities, literally from reading a book (even a short one like this!) to attending a course of sufficient duration to cause problems to continuity and your ability to keep things moving while you are away. Be realistic. You are not going to get permission to spend three months in an American business school every year, but you should aim at agreeing some mix of development activity on a regular basis. Appraisal is also a good moment for some feedback, and perhaps some appreciation, about past training and its usefulness.

Aim high. It is better to suggest more training than is approved, than to have no ideas about any, and it is easier to trade down than up.

Career development

It is always sensible to have an active plan for the development of your career. This involves assessing your strengths and weaknesses, looking at what direction you would like to take and what might be necessary to allow you to take it. From your point of view progress may ultimately take you away from your existing employer. If this is a firm intention, it may not be a suitable topic for discussion at an appraisal. However, the longer-term possibilities do need some discussion, and consideration is necessary here if you are to agree matters that may form important stepping stones along the way.



Such matters may initially be minor, say a small involvement with another department or activity, or they may involve, or initiate, much more of a jump ahead. You might know what you want to do in this regard, and want to discuss it or push for it. Alternatively you might be at the stage where an appraisal meeting is an opportunity to get some advice or start a longer-term dialogue. In such discussions, remember to emphasize the gains to the organization of changes you suggest, rather than simply saying that it is good for you.

Again having specific objectives in mind is important. Just planning to say 'What about the long term?' might take you into a substantial and useful digression, but it might only prompt a brief comment and a return to the next topic. Such a question does not constitute a true objective. Any objective needs to be specific, preferably measurable and linked to clear timing. So you may need to lead in with something that begins more like this: 'In two years' time I would hope to be doing. . . , to have a salary of. . . , and be in line for [the next step up]. How can we. . .' Aiming high is good, but at the same time you must select steps that are likely to be achievable (not, how do I become MD within the year). And you need to make your aims realistic (for example: not aiming in a direction that clearly needs special skills you do not have, at least without including something about their acquisition).

This is an important area, and one that it is easy to give too little attention to in the face of more immediate pressures. Yet the worst position to get yourself into is one where you look back and say to yourself 'If only. . .'. There is a line in one of John Lennon's songs that says 'Life is what happens while you are making other plans'. Not a



pleasant thought. The moral is always to balance your short- and long-term thinking and action about the future.

Rewards

This goes hand-in-hand with appraisal, though as has been said, the actual decisions may be separated. However it is handled in your organization never go into an appraisal meeting without some sensible thoughts and intentions about salary and benefits. Again aiming high is fine, but specific objectives are essential. It does not help you decide how to raise or deal with matters if you simply say to yourself 'I want as big an increase as possible'. You need to think about things in context (inflation, the levels paid to your peers and in other companies, etc). And remember that reward packages are complex these days. More money is something most people want, but changes to a range of things from car schemes to pensions also have monetary consequences, and it pays to keep the broad picture in mind.

Obviously there is a range of things that need consideration here. Some relate one to another, like new responsibilities and training that makes you able to take them on. Some have topical importance; others have longer-term implications. There is too much at stake to rely on a brief moment's thinking ahead of the meeting seeing you through, and the last thing you want is to emerge from so important a meeting and remember something you wanted to raise and simply forgot.

If you are clear in your mind, and sensibly have made some notes too, about what you want to achieve in all these



areas, then you can proceed to more formal preparation with that in mind. It may seem to indicate a greater task than it does. In reality, this thinking is something undertaken on a rolling basis. For the most part you are updating a pre-existing picture rather than starting with a blank sheet of paper, and this helps keep the process manageable. Whatever thinking through is entailed to clarify the range of objectives you then use, however, is likely to prove worthwhile. Such thinking is the first step in ensuring you get the most from your appraisal.

3

THE NECESSARY INFORMATION

Appraisals are most likely to be constructive when they concentrate not just on broad issues, but on specifics: what actually was done, how it was done and what results were achieved. But a great deal can happen during the course of a year. Try an experiment. Try to recall what you were doing in a particular week – pick one at random, maybe nine months ago. Even if you consult your diary, your recollections may be less than perfect.

One of the things that may occur during an appraisal meeting is precisely this. You will be asked to recall something from the past and comment on it – eg, how a project went. And you may not always get notice of what aspects of the last year's events this will relate to. However a topic comes up for discussion, introduced unexpectedly, or with some notice, or suggested by you as a significant event worthy of consideration as an example of how things have



gone over the past year, you need to have some details of it.

Perfect recollection is clearly not possible. No one recalls every detail of everything with which they have been involved. But some firm basis of recall is clearly useful. This may apply to details such as your diary. A day that notes: 10 am meeting with PF regarding project progress, may have been highly informative the day before, but means nothing six months on. Some vigilance in such matters may well be useful, but something more formal is also sensible, because the foundation of a successful appraisal meeting is good information.

Appraisal collection file

Appraisal schemes are usually accompanied by documentation (more of this later), so having a file relating to your past appraisals is logical enough. Simply dividing it into past and future sections can help you ensure the next one goes well.

The starting point is the documentation from your last appraisal. From then on you should make a point of collecting into that file documents (or copies of documents – their first purpose may suggest another file as their main resting-place) that have a bearing on your next meeting. These will include:

- a note of any courses you go on (as a minimum, file a copy of the course outline and a copy of any evaluation form you may have been asked to complete, perhaps together with a note of where any résumé notes are to be found);



- a note of any ‘significant events’ – these might include something about what your first presentation was, or the fact that you spoke at a trade association meeting or joined a significant committee;
- notifications of targets set, progress against them and ultimate results achieved;
- comments made by other people: maybe the MD wrote you a letter of congratulations about something, or a satisfied customer put pen to paper about service you delivered.

Other useful documents might be any memos, minutes of meetings or other documents that may be useful as a record of your activity and outputs.

The idea is not to hoard everything or spend a long time amassing this – a note rather than a whole document may well be sufficient. You can sensibly match the information you gather to the topics that you know will feature in your forthcoming review. For example, if you are judged in part on your communications skills, keep some evidence of them.

Remember that this is not solely a ‘boasting file’ containing references to your successes. If things do go wrong, or less well than you had hoped, they may well be subject to review also – this extends the information you can usefully collect.

Background information

In addition to the kinds of things mentioned, there are various other items that may be added as back-up. Key among these is your job description. This is not a formality,



though employment legislation and sometimes heavy-handed personnel practice can make it so, it is a working tool. Everyone needs a clear brief as to what his or her job entails (and maybe what lies outside its jurisdiction). In many companies, certainly at departmental level, job descriptions – if necessary minus any confidential information (about salary grades, say) – are circulated. This means that members of a team see exactly how responsibilities fit together, something that should include the manager of the section. This is something that you might bring up at an appraisal meeting as a means of clarifying matters and ensuring effective teamwork.

Sometimes appraisals use the structure and content of a job description as an element of their agenda. If so it is useful to have this in mind and, if not, then you may want to refer to areas included in the description but not mentioned.

Think about any other documentation that your own role might make useful, for example:

- financial results (especially when they form, even in part, a basis for your evaluation);
- standing or exceptional instructions;
- records indicating factors that have changed during the year;
- notes following any less formal evaluation or coaching that has taken place during the year.

If this sort of appraisal collection file is kept up to date and in order, then it can act as a useful reference when you come to prepare for your next appraisal meeting. There is one key reason for all this – the avoidance of argument. It is all too easy for appraisals to deteriorate into a table



tennis match of 'it was/it wasn't' arguments if any key facts are subject to misinterpretation or dispute. It benefits both parties, and makes the meeting much more likely to be constructive, if facts are clear to all. You cannot necessarily rely on your appraiser to produce the memo you know shows results improved by 10.7 per cent. You are just as likely to have them saying 'Well, figures were only up 10 per cent or so'; and the difference may be important.

The intention here is to ensure a constructive base for the meeting. It is not intended to suggest that there is a need for elaborate defences against appraisers eager to 'do you down'. But some of the points made here apply equally to appraisers. If it is difficult for you to remember the detail of what you have been up to all year, how much more difficult is it for a manager who has eight or 10 people reporting to him or her to do so? The overriding intention commended in this section is to play your part in ensuring that there is a sound basis of pertinent, accurate information for you to draw on as you approach an appraisal.

4

PREPARING FOR APPRAISAL

Your appraisal is too important to simply try to ‘wing’ it on the day. Preparation is surely necessary if you are to get the most from the process. Yet preparation is essentially no more than a formalized version of the age-old advice to engage the brain before the mouth. It need not be daunting, and it need not take too long.

Take the initiative

Among the guidelines given to any manager about conducting appraisals will be the need to give appraisees adequate advance notice. Surprise is not intended to be part of the procedure. Rather it is intended that appraisal meetings review the considered thoughts of both parties. You should get adequate warning and an agenda (giving an idea of how long the meeting is expected to last) and –



depending on the system being used – you may be asked to complete a form and return it ahead of the meeting. If the latter is the case then you have a formal opportunity to set down something about your performance.

All this may well happen. If so, then all's well and good. The occasion is sufficiently important to you, however, for you to take the initiative if this is not the case. You can ask in advance when an appraisal is to be scheduled (and maybe ask for some of the attendant information such as the duration of the meeting as you do so). You can also respond to any brief notification by asking for additional detail, specifying points such as duration, location, agenda, etc, and asking to have included any items that you feel will be useful. If such a request is made positively: 'Perhaps I may suggest that it would be useful to. . .', there is no reason why it should not be taken that way. If you want due consideration of points you raise it may be better to put them in writing rather than simply stick your head round someone's door and say, 'Do you have a minute?'

Conversely, you can be sure that if you simply arrive at the meeting and then start asking for changes and additions to the agenda, it will be likely to cause problems.

Note particularly any areas where clarification is necessary ahead of the meeting (or perhaps as it starts), decide how and when you will check them out and take the necessary action. One example, which may be important, is confidentiality. Before you speak out you need to know how this is regarded. Care spent on this sort of reconnaissance is always worthwhile.



Dealing with systems

Appraisals need a systematic approach. Without any system the review would become very subjective, and then it would be difficult to ensure that it was either thorough or fair. Because of this most organizations have thought through both the topics and headings under which they will evaluate performance, and the rating scales used to actually record a judgement on standards of performance. This is reflected in the forms and formats that you will see being used during the process.

Usually such documentation is divided into two distinct sections: one concerned with the past and a review of past performance, and the other concerned with a preview of the future. The first of these, as has been mentioned, may be used to collect your own initial evaluation ahead of the meeting.

Systems vary, not least in the amount of detail they are designed to collect, and many are tailored to reflect the nature of particular jobs and the tasks they entail. The checklist on pages 26–27 summarizes typical areas scheduled for review.



CHECKLIST: APPRAISAL FORM

Reviewing past performance

Agenda: the first questions may be linked to finalizing the meeting: 1) What do you want to emerge from this meeting?; 2) Are there special areas you would like to spend time on? and why?

Job: here questions focus on the task in hand, both qualitatively – with questions about what you like, have enjoyed or found satisfying or challenging (or a problem); and quantitatively – with questions about successes, and results and targets met or missed.

Relationships: investigating your work in terms of how it interacts with other people (whether peers, subordinates or those elsewhere in the organization – or outside it – with whom you must work or liaise).

Development: this heading allows a focus on skills – what is needed for the job now, how you rate yourself at them, and whether there are skills which need to be added or extended (or which are not currently being utilized).

Personal: an opportunity to think about things more in terms of feelings: have things been easy or difficult? Would you do things differently if it were possible? Are you being stretched, are you learning, or getting into a rut?



Special projects: some such heading allows specific, or more topical, areas of your work to be discussed.

Planning for future success

This section should rate at least half the discussion and time (possibly more). The focus is on the next period ahead and the way in which the chances of achieving success during it can be strengthened. Often the same main headings repeat, and questions need to allow for:

- changes and differences that are known or can be anticipated (year on year);
- ideas for improvement that might become part of next year's way of working;
- priorities for the period;
- your role and how it might change.

Always respect the system. Even if you do not like it you may be unable to change it, and any action you did take to see it amended in some way might be better kept separate from the cycle of your own appraisal. It is one thing to suggest going beyond the system, indeed the system may allow for this by specifically asking you for additional suggestions for discussion, it is quite another to ignore elements of it without good reason.

Some companies accompany their appraisal materials with a 'guidance for appraisees' document. If you are given something like this always take time to read it carefully. Also, whether you have such notes or not, if you do not



understand some aspect of the system always ask; and do so in good time. It helps no one to go into your review unclear in some way as to what is expected of you.

Rating scales

An inherent part of the appraisal format is likely to be rating scales. These take many forms and so too do the way organizations interpret them. Some may link them precisely to specific outcomes (including salary judgments); others use them less formally, with one end of the scale implying no action and the other some degree of corrective action.

Scales are not only there to flag the poorer performance or identify weaknesses (though they do that); they may be as useful – or more so – to explore what creates good performance and to see if there are lessons to be learned from it that can be passed round the organization.

The scales should therefore certainly be studied. The following shows some of the formats you might encounter:

- *a simple numeric scale*: 1–6, 1–7 or whatever, with one end being positive and the other negative (these could alternatively use labels such as A, B, C, etc);
- *a descriptive scale*: this may or may not be linked to numbers and the words may or may not be chosen with precision, eg excellent, very good, good, fair, adequate, unsatisfactory;
- *a graphic scale*: this is effectively just a line with identified positive and negative ends, eg high–low; and perhaps with mid- or quarter-points shown;



- *a comparative scale*: this might be a list of perhaps 4–10 statements: phrases like ‘better than most in the group’;
- *a behavioural scale*: this rates a list of options that specifically relates to things done, eg always, almost always, usually, infrequently or never done.

Essentially they all serve the same purpose, and also act to ensure consistency and fairness – that is, everyone is assessed in the same way, and each person is rated in a way that allows comparisons year on year.

So, study the system, complete and return any forms – on time – and also set aside some private time to consider the detail of what your appraisal might, will or should involve to make it work for you.

Think ahead

Systems apart, appraisals should be conversations. They may, however, cover a wealth of detail and last from an hour or so to two or three hours (or longer). It is a mistake to think you will remember everything that you want to ask or mention as the meeting goes along, and annoying to realize later that you have forgotten to raise a key issue as you intended.

All that is necessary is some thought and a few notes.

Keep the format of the appraisal in mind. After the first one with a particular employer you have a reasonable idea of how it will be done, and the first time questions can ensure it is not totally unknown territory. For example, if you know you are likely to be asked some introductory and broad-based question to start with: ‘All in all, how would you describe the year?’, then how you encapsulate



matters should be given some thought. A good turn of phrase may help get the meeting off to a good start and also help you establish the focus you want.

Beyond that, you need to consider systematically (and with the system in mind) a number of factors to help you through the meeting:

- *The topics you want to discuss:* these may be well described by the agenda and appraisal forms, but you may wish to add to or amend the list.
- *Examples within each topic:* for example, if your project management skills are to be discussed, then you may want to select one or more examples of what you have done during the year, and note specifically how you made them go well (choose one that did!), and what the outcomes were at the end. If you know examples will be raised of things not going so well, do not just amass excuses, think about what came out of it that was positive – what did you learn? How much better would something similar go next time?
- *Detailed points:* think also how you want to exemplify or describe the detail arising from the discussion, and how exactly you want to make the point. The same action could be described as taking place because of your excellent planning, or as a result of your inherent flexibility and ability to respond promptly and intelligently to unforeseen occurrences.
- *Areas for questioning:* and perhaps the actual questions you want to ask. Well-phrased questions speak of planning and a considered approach and this may be what you want. Not least, the job here is to discover what you want quickly and easily in a way that does



not disrupt the agenda or take up too much time.

Incidentally, there is no need for secrecy about all this. If you find it useful to sit down in the meeting with some notes, and even a file of exhibits, in front of you then do so. You do not want either to forget something or to handle it inappropriately; and the appraiser will approve of your preparation.

While you can never anticipate everything and planning must be flexible, a sound plan will make it more likely that you will handle the meeting well and that you will cope with any unforeseen circumstances along the way.

One last point: if you have thought through things in this way you will feel more confident about the meeting. Appraisals can seem stressful occasions; after all there may be a good deal hanging on them. But stress is a reaction. A difficult meeting you have not planned is certainly likely to worry you. A well-planned meeting, one that you have confidence in your ability to handle, is more likely to go well.

5

THE APPRAISAL MEETING

Now, the moment arrives. You are in the hot seat, and you have to do your best to make the meeting go well. As the last chapter explained, preparation is vital. A deep breath as you walk through the door is unlikely to be sufficient, but there are certainly things which, when you get to this stage, you can do to assist in making the process go smoothly. None of the detail that follows is itself complex. But appraisals, like many meetings for that matter, do require the orchestration of a number of different elements. The complexity – and the need for care – is more in this overall orchestration than in any one individual area. The better you understand the nature of the meeting, and all that needs to or might go on in it, the easier this job will be.



First impressions last

Any injunction about first impressions is likely to be something of a cliché. That may be. If everything gets off to a good start, then this gives you greater confidence and acts to keep the meeting on track.

Several things are worth bearing in mind at this stage. They include:

- *Appearance:* you need to look the part. I would not presume to tell you how to dress. Suffice to say that this is not a good day to find your suit looks as if it was slept in (or was!) or that you are saying 'I really must get my hair cut.'
- *Manner:* this too is a personal matter, though worth a moment's thought. You may well have your appraisal conducted by someone you know well, the manager you work with on a day-to-day basis. But it could be someone else, perhaps more senior, perhaps less well known to you; and it could, in some organizations, involve two people or even a panel. Do not overreact and believe the meeting must be very formal, but adjust your level of familiarity or flippancy as seems appropriate.
- *Procedure:* if necessary, take the initiative and double-check anything unknown about the agenda, format and duration for the meeting. This should have been spelled out in advance; if not, such things are best clarified at the start.

Then relax. This is a meeting that is designed to help you and to benefit the organization. It should be interesting, it should be constructive and it may even be stimulating.



Approach it as such, rather than with doom and gloom or too much apprehension, and it is likely to go better. Let any reservations you have about it show and that alone could change the attitude an appraiser takes to you.

Once the meeting is underway there are several techniques that you will need to deploy – all with your objectives in mind, and in ways that react intelligently to what occurs (which will never be exactly as you predicted). Most important are your abilities to listen, to ask questions, to comment, to deal with any criticism, and to pick up and link to any opportunities presented.

These techniques are now considered in turn.

Listening

Of course you listen. Really? Never had a breakdown in communications because you did not really take something in properly? If you want to demonstrate to yourself how listening varies in effectiveness, just consider what happens when someone says something that you disagree with. At once your mind begins to spend some of its power, not on listening, but on developing a counter-argument. The effect of this can be pronounced.

Not only do you want to take in clearly everything that is said to you in an appraisal, you want to appear to be a good listener, one who takes the proceedings seriously. The checklist that follows sets out some principles that are useful and which certainly show listening to be an active process.



CHECKLIST: EFFECTIVE LISTENING

- *Want to listen:* recognizing how it can help you is the first step to doing it well.
- *Look like a good listener:* let the appraiser see that he or she has your attention by appropriate eye contact and acknowledgement of what is said to you.
- *Listen and stop talking:* you cannot do both at once, the meeting will become awkward if you do and you need to resist the temptation to interrupt, waiting until the point is fully made (or what you do will seem like evasion).
- *Use empathy:* put yourself in the other person's shoes, try to see things from his or her point of view and make it clear you are doing so.
- *Check:* clarify as you go along if anything is not clear – leaving it can simply build up bigger problems later.
- *Remain calm:* concentrate on the facts and try not to let overreaction, or becoming emotional, hinder your ability to take in the full message.
- *Concentrate:* and allow nothing to distract you.
- *Focus on key points:* get to the nub of what is being said, which may be buried in other, less important, information and comment.
- *Avoid personalities:* concentrate on what is said – the argument – rather than on who is saying it.
- *Take one thing at a time:* jumping ahead, especially if you do so on the basis of assumption, can cause problems.



- *Avoid negative reactions:* hear the comment out and do not look horrified (even if you are!) ahead of working out how you intend to proceed.
- *Make notes:* do not trust your memory, jot down key points as the meeting proceeds (and, if you feel it is polite or necessary, ask permission to do so).

Perhaps all this should go without saying, but it is easy to find yourself regarding an appraisal as a rather traumatic occasion, at least to some extent, and forgetting to handle things thoroughly.

Questions

There is no rule about the order here. Sometimes you will be asked questions or be on the receiving end of comments to which you must respond. But you may need to respond to such with a question – indeed there is often no reason why a question cannot be answered by a question – and there will be occasions during the meeting when you should lead in this way. The alternative is to find you are off target and not talking about what is really required.

Questions can easily be ambiguous (this is possible whoever puts them). This is something that leads us back to preparation. Part of the time before the meeting may usefully be spent not only thinking of what you might ask, but how you can put it clearly and succinctly. Some thought here is well worthwhile, as confusion can annoy and waste time.



Three types of question can be used:

- *Closed questions*: these are questions that can be answered easily with a quick 'yes' or 'no'. As such they are most useful for checking facts and leading into deeper areas of investigation. But otherwise their use may be limited, especially when a fuller answer is sought.
- *Open questions*: these cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. They are designed to get people talking, to elucidate real information and detail. They typically start with the words: what, why, when, where, how and who and with phrases such as 'Tell me about. . .' (the latter may not technically be a question, but does get people talking).

The difference between these two approaches is marked. Ask 'Will I be able to take on new things next year?' (or specify a particular area of work), and the answer may well be 'yes'. But if the conversation then moves on, you have really discovered very little. When will a new involvement start? How will it be initiated? What will it involve?, and so on. However, ask 'Tell me something about any new involvements you see me taking on next year' and the subsequent conversation may explain much more.

- *Probing questions*: sometimes even an open question does not produce everything you want. Then you need to be prepared to pursue a point, asking a series of questions to focus on a particular area and get to the required level of detail. Phrases like 'Tell me more about. . .' or 'Can you explain that further' may make a good start.



Making comments

Appraisals demand you comment on your work and performance. This is what your preparation should have addressed. Your objectives are perhaps to maximize the impressiveness of what you describe and minimize anything negative. You may receive some criticism – more of this later.

The key issues are again common sense:

- *Be clear:* follow all the rules of good communication; do not digress, beware of inappropriate jargon and get your point across succinctly. This may seem the simplest part of the proceedings, but it is worth some thought. Remember you probably know a good deal more about the details of your job than the appraiser. Remember too that clarity, especially where complexity is expected, impresses.
- *Be descriptive:* is it sufficient to say you ‘made a plan’, or better to say what kind of plan it was – practical, excellent, creative? Use some well-chosen adjectives to support what you say. There is no reason why you cannot use some visual aids if they would help. Do not struggle to describe complex figures, for example, if one glance at a pie chart would allow the appraiser to see the point in a moment.
- *Concentrate on implications and results:* do not just comment on what happened or was done, describe how it was done and especially what came from it. For instance, perhaps you saw to the production of a new corporate brochure. You can just mention this, or you can mention how it was produced, your copy-writing



skills, the deadline being achieved or bettered, how investigating several printers saved money, and the positive reaction expressed by customers about it – or even the business that has already resulted from it. All the later points can be chosen to link in with your agenda and objectives and how you want to put things over.

- *Provide proof:* where necessary do not just say what happened, but demonstrate it, documenting evidence or quoting figures where appropriate. Incidentally, figures that may often be used in evidence must always be quoted appropriately. It may be sufficient to say ‘the increase was around 10 per cent’, but better to say ‘productivity went up 10.8 per cent’ (and never say ‘about 10.7 per cent’; the juxtaposition of the word ‘about’ and a precise figure just does not work).

Dealing with criticism

Badly conducted appraisals will often focus almost exclusively on the things that have gone less than perfectly. At worst the conversation then deteriorates into an argument and as things are discussed nothing very much is achieved.

But any appraisal is going to spend time on difficulties – it goes with the territory so to speak – and you must be ready to deal with this. Three intentions should be uppermost in your mind in this respect, over and above a general desire to put the best complexion on everything.



- *Achieving accuracy*: here your intention is to ensure that the right facts are considered. Beware of the appraiser using vague statements such as 'You're never on time with anything.' This is unlikely to be true. But what are you late with and what are the implications? It is easier to discuss specifics and questions may well be the route to identify them.
- *Never arguing with anything but the true facts*: checking what is really meant is the first step to responding to what is said in the right way.
- *Giving an impression of objectivity*: if every criticism is seen simply to put you into automatic defensive mode, then discussion will be unlikely to be constructive. Using an acknowledgement to position what follows is always useful. It:
 - indicates you feel there is a point to discuss (if you do not, then we are back to achieving accuracy, see page 38 and above);
 - shows that you are not going to argue unconstructively;
 - makes it clear that you intend to respond in a serious and considered fashion;
 - gives you a moment to think (which may be very useful!) and sets up the subsequent discussion so that you can handle it better.

Just a few words may be all that is necessary here. Starting with a 'yes' gives it power: 'Yes, there was a problem with that', and sounds right even if your intention is to go on to minimize the problem.



- *Dealing with the points raised:* now the job is to deal with the matter. The options are few and therefore manageable. You may need to explain why a difficulty occurred, then there are four routes to handling things:
 - 1 *Remove the difficulty:* if possible, you can explain that what seemed like a difficulty or error was not in fact that. A delay, say, might not have been in an original plan, but caused little problem.
 - 2 *Reduce the difficulty:* maybe you have to acknowledge that there was some difficulty, but explain that it was of little significance.
 - 3 *Turn the difficulty into a plus:* sometimes it is possible to argue that what might initially seem like a problem is not really. A delay might not have been in an original plan, but included for a positive reason – there might only have been a real problem without the delay.
 - 4 *Agree the difficulty:* after all, there is no point in trying to argue that black is white. Most ordinary mortals have some problems during a whole year of activity. Your job is not to persuade the appraiser that there were no problems, but to persuade the appraiser that, on balance, your year was a good one.

Remember that the prime purpose of appraisal is to set the scene for successful work in the coming year, not argue about what cannot be changed. None of us can turn the clock back, but all of us can learn from experience. So the key thing to include when the discussion touches on difficulties, is the lessons that have been learned for the future.



The list of implications and actions here is considerable. Failure may have come about because of unforeseen circumstances (and new procedures are necessary in case such circumstances occur again). You may be starting to use skills not previously necessary in the job (and training may be needed to quickly add them to your portfolio). You may have made a simple slip (and only need to make a firm mental note not to let it happen again). There may be lessons to learn, but ultimately the emphasis needs to be on what happens next, and this allows a return to the most constructive elements of the dialogue.

Note: if you have made gross errors you may find that your appraisal overlaps into a disciplinary procedure. Similarly, your appraisal may be the first occasion on which you raise matters such as discrimination that are, in turn, linked to employment legislation. The details of both disciplinary procedures and of complex employment law are beyond the scope of this short text; if the necessity arises do investigate them separately.

Targets

When considering results it should be recognized that in any particular job some targets may well be sacrosanct. They may also link directly and automatically to the way you are rated, and indeed paid. If you fail to hit a sales target, say, or a particular level of productivity, specific sanctions may cut in. Again the conclusion may be only that this goes with the territory. Appraisals take a view of the job as it is and judge performance accordingly.



It may be that circumstances or events lead to conclusions being drawn, or action decided upon, that change some of the seemingly fixed parameters. In this case documentation, for instance a change to the written job description, may be necessary.

Ratings

Where appropriate, ratings used for formal measurement during appraisal may need noting (perhaps completing a form) as the appraisal proceeds; alternatively this may be done at the end of the meeting. Some of these may be linked to targets and, as such, can be pre-judged; ie a failure to hit a target is known in advance of the meeting and thus the outcome is known too. Essentially though, the judgements should be made during the meeting and, as it may not be known why something occurred, the discussion is needed to allow a fair judgement to be made.

Opportunities

Always be on the lookout for opportunities. Circumstances and attitudes that come to light during the meeting may create a fresh view of something. A new involvement may come out of a project handled during the year that seemed only a distraction. Yet, well handled, it throws up discussions about capabilities that you have displayed, which would not otherwise have been seen. And this in turn allows discussion to investigate new paths for the future.



Sometimes you can spot and lead into such a discussion. Sometimes the appraiser does so, maybe incorporating information you knew nothing of beforehand. In the latter case you have to be sure you see what is happening and link it to your own aims and objectives.

Action plans

All appraisal meetings benefit from a clear summary. You may be asked to do this or to comment and add to the appraiser's summary. At this stage, ratings apart, one of the most important issues to be clear about is the definition of any action plans that are being put together.

These may be specific and firm: you are to commence sitting on a management committee from 15 December, for example. Or they may be an initial idea that needs following up. In the latter case all that can be made specific is the arrangement for a later meeting to investigate further or tie things down. On some topics, it may be a better outcome for you to have an additional and separate meeting set than to insist on lengthy discussion at the time that disrupts the agenda and timing for the whole appraisal.

Do not forget

Whatever happens, and sometimes appraisal meetings do get a little emotional, always keep your cool. Never overreact. Certainly you can, on occasion, be assertive – probably your appraiser expects no less. You must have the courage of your convictions about things, but your image will suffer if you get angry or upset where this is



inappropriate. If necessary take a deep breath and never be afraid to say 'Perhaps I may think about that for a moment' as you collect your thoughts. What is wanted are your considered views, not rash outbursts.

At the end

So, at the end of the session you can leave the meeting with:

- a constructive discussion behind you;
- ratings agreed and documented;
- a development plan updated;
- some lessons learned and noted;
- plans laid and dates set for the coming period; and
- maybe, additional time scheduled for further discussion of specific issues.

Whatever else, and however good or bad the appraisal might have been, you can leave with a personal profile that is positive in a number of ways, for example in your:

- attitude to the appraisal;
- conduct and constructive attitude during it;
- willingness to accept constructive criticism and learn from it;
- ability to identify and focus on the key results areas;
- likelihood of being able to deliver a good performance next year.



30 Minutes . . . Before Your Job Appraisal

All over? Forget about it all until the same time next year? No, there is just a little more to be considered if you are going to maximize any advantage that you can obtain from your appraisal.

AFTER THE MEETING

Phew! The meeting is over. Maybe it was not as daunting as you thought it would be. Maybe it went well. However it may have turned out, there is a temptation to heave a sigh of relief, put the whole thing to one side and get on with the job. To do so is almost certainly a mistake. There is more to do, and consideration of this is worth a moment's thought.

The appraisal cycle

Before turning to the practical action needed after an appraisal meeting, consider the cycle of events of which appraisal is part. The cycle of action necessary to ensure ongoing good performance flows as follows:

- *Job definition:* the first task is to define the job in terms of its objectives and tasks and any attendant matters – the relationships it involves, the boundaries and overlaps with other jobs, etc.



- *Capabilities definition*: this defines the knowledge, skills and attitudes that it is necessary to have to be able to do justice to the job.
- *Assessment of the actual level of capabilities*: in other words the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes that an individual currently has.
- *Identify changes*: additional or extended knowledge, skills and attitudes that the job may demand when looking ahead to what it will involve in the future.
- *Set developmental objectives*: decide what action may be necessary to close any gap between the existing level of capabilities and what is actually needed.
- *Set priorities*: decide what must be done first, second and so on.
- *Implement development activities*: carry out the planned activity.
- *Evaluate progress*: check how things are developing and link back to the job definition and requirements.

This describes a continuous cycle of activity. Some of it is formal. The definition of the job, for instance, can result in a formal job description or revision of the existing description being issued. Some of it is informal, with development activity and evaluation both being made up, in part, of activity that is blended in with the ongoing job and with the regular dialogue between a manager and those supervised.

The annual job appraisal (or indeed any additional scheduled meetings) is simply one part of this continuum. This view may help make the meeting seem a more routine and less exceptional activity. It also shows the necessity



for follow-up action. Appraisal is not something that happens in isolation. It is a catalyst to the whole process. Appraisal is concerned ultimately with prompting future performance and helping make it achieve results. So too are the actions that spring from it.

The system

A simple point first. Always complete any forms that link to appraisal promptly. First, to comply with the system; it is a pity to blot your copybook as it were by missing the first deadline you have to hit after your appraisal meeting. Second, because if you leave this sort of thing your ability to recall salient details fades away fast (as anyone who has to compile minutes of meetings knows). The details matter and you want there to be a clear record of what transpired.

If there are documents that will be sent to you by the appraiser, ask when you will receive them. Link all documentation back to your appraisal collection file; the first actions to help make next year's appraisal go well take place immediately after this year's.

Link to your work system

There may be a number of decisions and intentions to take further. You may have agreed to:

- check out suitable courses on some area of skill and make suggestions as to what you should attend;
- provide additional background information about the past;



- take on new responsibilities that need briefing meetings to be set up;
- review targets or objectives more frequently in future, or for a period.

These and many more possible actions may need linking to your diary, confirming in memos and remembering for the future. Remember that if the manager who appraises you has lots of people reporting to him or her, then he or she may collect a long list of follow-up actions. A suggestion that you document things where appropriate may make sure that it is remembered and that action follows sooner rather than later.

Some actions may be things you want to get out of the way, like a further check on some aspect of your work that was questioned. Other actions may be things about which you are enthusiastic – they lead on to new chances or challenges. Follow both up and maintain a positive attitude about the whole process.

Remember, feedback from you conditions future events. Say you obtain agreement to some form of training at your appraisal. You are keen to undertake it, follow up, schedule attendance on a course of some sort, and duly attend. If it is successful let your manager know – including a ‘thank you’ if appropriate – and link it back to the ongoing tasks. If it was not the right thing, say so. You may need to go on something else and others may be protected from a similar waste of time.



Future progress

Rome was not built in a day, and appraisals do not act to solve all problems and kick-start our progress, guaranteeing effortless generation of future results and rewards to match. But appraisals should be a constructive part of the continuity of consideration and action that links what we do now to the dynamic nature of the environment in which we work, and give us some hope of keeping up.

The appraisal meeting can be a significant part of the process. It will not automatically go well. Some systems are inflexible, inappropriate or ill thought out. Some managers regard the whole thing as a chore. Some aspects of corporate bureaucracy act to dilute the effectiveness of appraisals, maybe by focusing artificially on unconstructive aspects and forgetting the main purpose. Both appraisers and appraisees contribute to the process and either can act to ensure that it is constructive rather than irrelevant and time wasting.

If you play your part – working at it from one appraisal to the next – then you stimulate the process in the right direction. Small actions can make a significant difference, with just one extra well-considered question taking the discussion into a new, helpful and relevant area. You have a good deal to gain; never let any aspect of appraisal go by default.

AFTERWORD

‘The best way to win an argument is to begin by being right.’

Jill Ruckelshaus

We will end as we started by taking a strictly realistic view of the work environment. At the start of the new millennium the work environment is, in a word, dynamic. Jobs for life are a thing of the past and waiting for work to ‘return to normal’, some vision of more secure times, is simply not one of the options. Few, if any, people are paid just for turning up. All of us, at whatever level of the organizational hierarchy we work, are judged by results; that is fair – results are what we are there to achieve.

It is also reasonable that managers should want to know how people are doing and that they should seek to improve their performance. Individually most of us want to know too. Job satisfaction comes, in large part, from a sense of achievement and we must know what, and how much, we are achieving. So appraisal is a practical tool in the management process. And ultimately its prime purpose is



to increase the likelihood of future performance being satisfactory – better still, of it qualifying as excellent.

Because you can get very close to what you do, the appraisal meeting represents a useful opportunity to step back and review how things are going, and to look ahead and plan how things can be made to go well in the future. Essentially, for those being appraised there are two key areas where appraisal can help: 1) by maximizing existing and future job performance; and 2) by playing a part in longer-term career planning and development.

The two are clearly closely related. Careers tend not to prosper if performance in the current job is suspect. So any help that appraisal can give is to be welcomed in both respects. What did the old Beatles song say? ‘I get by with a little help from my friends.’ No one succeeds in a corporate environment entirely by his or her own efforts. Most of us benefit from a variety of advice, information and assistance along the way that comes to us, wittingly or unwittingly, from those with whom we work.

Appraisals should be seen in that light. Of course, there is an element of ‘checking up’ about the process, but it is – or should be – constructive, and a process that looks to the future. Ignore it or treat it lightly at your peril. See it as a resource that is part of what can help you succeed and then take an active view of getting the most from it, and you will help it do more for you.

The key to getting the most from appraisals can be summarized in 10 key points, as follows:



CHECKLIST

- Take appraisal seriously (it is a luxury to be able to step back and think about what you are doing).
- View it constructively – focus on what you (and your organization) can gain from it.
- Study and become familiar with the system your organization uses.
- Keep appraisals in mind during the year and gather the facts and information that will help your next one.
- Prepare thoroughly for the meeting, thinking of what you want to discuss and anticipating what will be raised.
- Aim to play an active part in the meeting, rather than simply be led by events.
- Put your points over clearly and positively.
- Ask anything where you feel comment or information would be helpful.
- Record any action points agreed during the meeting (and be sure to hit any deadlines for action agreed).
- Be open in discussion, constructive about criticism, positive about opportunities for the future and always receptive to new ways of doing things and new things you might do.

Everyone wants to be successful. It is an old, but wise, maxim that there is a significant difference between five years' experience and one year's experience repeated five times. Ensuring that you are on the path for five years' experience, and that your experience, competence, success



– and thus your role – all grow, is a process that needs regular time and attention.

One repeating part of the process is your regular job appraisals. Make the most of them and they can play a significant part in your progress and success.

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